

Proposal ECER 2017 – Paper presentation – Ben Smit

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Title of presentation

‘Focus on the Learner’ in Teacher Education: PAR as a Strategy to Enable Student Voice in Schools

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10. Teacher Education Research

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General description (max. 600 words)

Teaching is a complex profession, encompassing a broad array of tasks and roles, related to various pedagogical, didactical, and organizational aspects of educational practice. Teacher education (TE) is supposed to prepare prospective teachers for this complex practice, and provide them with sufficient knowledge and competencies to enter the profession at an adequate level, and with a disposition to continue their professional learning and developing during the whole teaching career.

In present times, more and more, teachers are required to also have an ‘inquiry stance’ or a ‘research attitude’. Such an attitude should foster the uptake of results from academic research in educational practice. However, because of the complex nature of education, a mechanistic or technological application of research might be counter-productive, and results from other research should always be reviewed and adapted in the light of local circumstances and according to ethical and moral decisions about the aims and purposes of education (Biesta, 2016). The local, site-based character of educational research and the importance of inclusion of relevant stakeholders’ perspectives, are reasons to advocate research by teachers themselves, within their own school practices. Moreover, teacher research is seen as a possible way to reduce the theory-practice gap (Admiraal, Smit, & Zwart, 2014).

Interestingly, although the focus of much teacher research is designed to improve student learning, the voices of students themselves in this form of research are largely missing (Groundwater-Smith, 2005). One approach to including student voice is through ‘students as co-researchers’, for example, through participatory action research (PAR) (Smit, 2013). Participatory action research by students and teachers and/or teacher educators collaboratively, on educational issues of mutual interest is a possible approach for attaining several goals: enhancing teachers’ and teacher educators’ awareness of and capacity for enabling student participation; developing a participatory school practice by modeling democracy/citizenship in practice; improving student-teacher relationships; creating a rich context for teachers’ professional development; improving teaching practice through teacher action research in TE and schools; developing motivating and differentiated contexts for school students.

While action research by teachers and in TE and PD programs has been studied (e.g. Hine, 2013; Ponte, 2010), little is known about how to incorporate both teacher research *and* student participation through PAR in a TE program and subsequently in schools, and what conditions enable or constrain this. Currently, no such programs exist within Dutch university TE. The present project concerns to understand how pre-service teacher students (PSTs) can set-up and conduct research together with their school students and how to design a one-year TE program that prepares and motivates PSTs for this approach.

The study is conducted with two cohorts of PSTs and secondary school students within a one-year-master program at Leiden University, over two consecutive academic years. Their regular capstone research assignment was modified, namely as PAR, in order to promote teacher-learner partnerships, in school-based research.

Accordingly, the TE program and teaching approach was modified, such that it reflects the participatory principle of the teacher-learner partnership. An important principle guiding the study was to align educational practice in the TE program to the intended participatory approach in the research project and school practice of the PSTs.

The current presentation addresses characteristics of the TE program, PSTs learning outcomes, and enabling and constraining factors in the development and enactment of PAR.

Research questions:

- What are the characteristics of a TE program aimed at preparing PSTs for conducting PAR with school students, and fostering school student participation in educational decision-making?
- What learning processes of PSTs towards school student participation are supported through the TE program?
- What factors enable or constrain attaining the goals of the PAR initiative?

Methods/methodology (max. 400 words)

The study used a multiple embedded case study design of PAR cases in schools, and an educational design approach for developing the TE program. Data were collected during two full iterations of the one-year TE program: academic years 2015-2016 and 2016-2017. In total 34 student teachers were enrolled in the specific track of the TE program. Five teacher educators and one PAR facilitator were involved. Fourteen student teachers, who completed their teaching practice and research assignment at five different secondary schools, were selected for case studies. The cases covered seven school subjects: English, Spanish, Economics, Biology, Mathematics, History, Social Studies.

Data were collected through TE interviews, TE learner reports, TE staff meetings, seminar field notes, PST one-minute papers, PST research logs, individual and focus group interviews, and educational materials (Study Guide, lesson plans, Blackboard exchanges).

Qualitative data analysis was aimed at identifying linkages between contextual factors, program characteristics (interventions), processes (mechanisms) and outcomes, in order to formulate design propositions following a CIMO-logic approach (Denyer, Tranfield, & van Aken, 2008). Practice theory (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008) and recognition theory (Honneth, 1995, 2012) was used to interpret the results and to describe enabling and constraining factors of the educational praxis, as it is shaped and formed by 'practice architectures' that constitute mediating preconditions.

Expected outcomes / results (max. 300 words)

Preliminary findings indicate that salient characteristics of the program relate to a consistent and sustained emphasis on the perspective of the learner. However, also for teacher educators this implied a change in their thinking and in their teaching strategies, which was facilitated by focused staff discussions and reflective TE learner reports. In this way, TEs increasingly modeled and scaffolded the participatory approach.

Furthermore, because of their background in other academic disciplines, many PSTs are not familiar with educational/social science research, and initially some do not have a positive disposition toward qualitative research approaches. Addressing this issue early in the program is needed to develop an understanding of the nature of educational action research and the way school students can be involved in research activities.

Adjusted program content, specific assignments aimed at focusing on the learner, and extra facilitation of the PSTs in developing and conducting their research plans fosters a positive disposition in PSTs towards PAR and participation of their school students, and influences the form and intensity of school student participation in their research, for instance not only in roles of 'data sources' or 'active respondents', but in the role of 'co-researchers' as well.

Through ongoing analysis, preliminary findings will be completed with an overview of enabling and constraining factors. Conclusions will focus on design propositions for a TE program aimed at preparing PSTs for school student participation in educational decision-making through PAR.

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